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Book Review: *Birds of the Untamed West. The History of Birdlife in Nebraska, 1750 to 1875* by James E. Ducey

W. Ross Silcock

Nebraska Ornithologists' Union, silcock@rosssilcock.com

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Birds of the Untamed West. The History of Birdlife in Nebraska. 1750 to 1875. by James E. Ducey. 2000. Making History Press, Omaha, NE.

Book Review by W. Ross Silcock, P.O. Box 57, Tabor, IA 51653.

Those with an interest in the birds of the Great Plains will be familiar with Jim Ducey's Nebraska Birds: Breeding Status and Distribution, published in 1988. I was amazed then by Jim's diligence in searching a wide range of sources and compiling an exhaustive list of Nebraska breeding records organized by county. Jim's new book, Birds of the Untamed West, reflects the same dogged pursuit of obscure sources unavailable to most of us and compilation of the results. If you expect such a compilation to be dry and boring, you will be pleasantly surprised, especially if you are a Nebraska history buff. This book is a "good read" as well as being an extremely useful source for bird records in the period 1750 through 1875.

In his introduction Jim states, "The primary intent of this work is to provide a single source of historical information on the birdlife of just one portion of the Plains. I hope this goal has been accomplished." In my opinion, this goal has indeed clearly been accomplished. In addition, Jim has presented fascinating historical information, including pictures, on the early travelers in the region, the habitat they reported, and the birds they saw. This part of the book makes interesting reading and is probably the only single source for this material. Jim makes the point that this information provides a baseline for comparisons with the present status of bird species and their habitat. In itself, this is a valuable contribution. Observations of birds were not the first priority of most of the expeditions, but usually excellent naturalists and artists were along to record what was seen. Later expeditions, notably those of Major Stephen Long (with Thomas Say), John Kirk Townsend, and Gouverneur Kemble Warren, included trained zoologists who preserved several specimens of Nebraska birds, including a few new to science; many of

these specimens are still extant. Birder-historians will recognize the names Say and Townsend as in Say's Phoebe and Townsend's Warbler.

Personally, as one who is co-author of a forthcoming comprehensive book on the birds of Nebraska, I found the final chapter, "List of Species," most interesting and useful. Usually, records of Nebraska birds begin with the publications of observers such as Samuel Aughey, a University of Nebraska professor who published the first comprehensive list of Nebraska birds in 1878. Despite the date span in the title of Jim's book, he has used Aughey's list as one of his sources in compiling the List of Species. I think this is a good idea, as Aughey's list signalled the beginning of scientific study of Nebraska's birds at the University of Nebraska, and the close of the period of exploration in the state by Europeans.

The List of Species compiles all reports of each species that Jim was able to extract from his large number of sources. Not only do these sources include the journals of the European explorers, notably Lewis and Clark, Major Long, Prince Maximilian, John J. Audubon, and the Warren Expedition, but Jim has delved into Native American traditions and oral history. I find the latter to be extremely interesting as it demonstrates how important birds were in tribal traditions and how much was known about birds by Native Americans. I am amazed by Jim's struggles with the various Native American languages; he probably is rather conversant with some of them as a result of his research for this book!

I found this book to be well bound and printed in an easily-readable font. It is an excellent value at the published price of \$25, and I recommend it wholeheartedly to anyone with an interest in Nebraska's birds and early history.